DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 270 771 CS 209 820

AUTHOR Hartung, Barbara W.; JaCoby, Alfred
TITLE Readers' Views toward a Newspaper Ombudsman Program.
PUB DATE Aug 86
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (69th, Norman, OK, August 3-6, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; *Media Research; *Newspapers; *Ombudsmen; Public Opinion; *Reader Response

ABSTRACT

A study examined (1) whether the public knows of the newspaper ombudsman and his or her role at the newspaper, and (2) probed the effects of calling a newspaper on public perceptions of the newspaper's interest in accuracy and correcting errors. Two telephone questionnaires were completed by 152 of the 438 persons who had contacted the ombudsman at "The San Diego Union" from January through October 1984. These opinions were compared with those of 202 randomly selected persons who had not called the paper. Both samples were comprised of "Union" subscribers and nonsubscribers. The results indicated that well over half of those who had occasion to call the newspaper knew of the ombudsman by name, or referred to him as a reader's representative or ombudsman. Those who had never called the newspaper about a problem indicated far less knowledge of the ombudsman and his role. The majority of callers were satisfied with the newspaper's response to their calls, with over 40% indicating they were very satisfied. Complaints fell into two major negative categories--fact errors and disagreement over newspaper policy and news judgment. The results indicated, however, that the reason for the complaint was not important to the caller when considering satisfaction with the newspaper's response. The results suggest that calling a newspaper ombudsman may have some positive effect. (Tables of data are included.) (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED270771

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Newspaper Division

Readers' Views Toward A Newspaper Ombudsman Program

By

Barbara W. Hartung
Department of Journalism
San Diego State University
San Diego, CA 92182
(619) 265-6635

Alfred JaCoby
Assistant Managing Editor
The San Diego Union
P.O. Box 191
San Diego, CA 92112
(619) 299-3131

Presented to annual meeting of the Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Newspaper Division, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, August, 1986.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Barbara W. Hartung

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS209820

Readers' Views Toward a Newspaper Ombudsman Program

Background

Almost two decades ago, the idea of a newspaper ombudsman was introduced and began to make its way into American newspapering. While not overwhelmingly adopted, the concept did capture the imagination of a handful of editors of the nation's largest newspapers and grew slowly but steadily until today about thirty-five ombudsmen represent the reader on daily newspapers.[1]

Media critic Ben H. Bagdikian suggested the press ombudsman concept in an article in the March, 1967 Esquire magazine, when he wrote,

> Some brave owners someday will provide for a community ombudsman on his paper's board, maybe a non-voting one, to be present, to speak, to provide a symbol and, with luck, exert public interest in the ultimate fate of the American newspaper.[2]

Three months later A.H. Raskin, then assistant editorial page editor of The New York Times, wrote in the Times' "Magazine" section, "There is a need in every paper for a Department of Internal Criticism to put all its standards under re-examination and to serve as a public protector in its day-to-day operations." He went on to urge that these departments should "check on the fairness and adequacy of their coverage and comment."[3]

By June, 1967, the first ombudsman for a U.S. newspaper, John Herchenroeder of the Louisville Courier-Journal and Times, had been appointed.[4]

The initial research on the ombudsman program began to appear in 1973 when Barnett reported that eight newspapers had appointed ombudsmen and that the ombudsman generally functioned as a complaint receiver/investigator and as an in-house critic.[5]

In 1974 Nelsen and Starck reported that ombudsmen positions had been established by about a dozen American newspapers.[6] Further, they reported that a study of two St. Petersburg newspapers revealed that the Times staff, which had an ombudsman,

proved more supportive of the ombudsman concept than the Independent staff, which did not.

The role of the ombudsman was further articulated and a profile drawn in 1979 by Kapoor and Smith who studied 198 U.S. publishers and found the ombudsman's responsibilities broadening and strengthening, despite the fact that only about 15 percent of the publishers said they had full-time ombudsmen.[7]

An extensive report by Mogavera in 1982 documents that 22 U.S. dailies had ombudsmen operating programs primarily to raise the confidence of the reader toward news, to help the reader understand the intricacies of the press, and to provide the reader access to the press.[8] Interviews were conducted at 17 newspapers where ombudsman programs were operating. Through these interviews, Mogavera isolated three variables in the ombudsman operation: the external function, the internal function and internal assessment.

Bernstein reported in 1986 on a study of nearly 400 Louisville, Kentucky, respondents, who are exposed to ombudsmen in the city's two major dailies. He found that those with higher awareness of the ombudsman have higher perceptions of newspaper accountability.[9]

While it is difficult to measure precisely the effect of an ombudsman on readers, it is possible to ask the public about perceptions of the ombudsman and satisfaction with the newspapers' responses among those persons contacting the newspaper. This was done through a research study in November, 1984, in cooperation with The San Diego Union.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to determine if the public knows of the newspaper ombudsman and his role at the newspaper and to probe the effects of calling a

newspaper on public perceptions of the newspaper's interest in accuracy and correcting errors.

The theoretical proposition underlying this study is that people sufficiently moved to call a newspaper with a complaint are people with lower levels of satisfaction than those who never call (although this specific issue was not tested in this study). This general idea suggests that after talking with a newspaper representative, levels of satisfaction of the complainer would rise to become equal to or greater than those of the non-caller.

Hence, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H_1: Complainers are equally likely or more likely to feel the newspaper has a high interest in accuracy after talking to the ombudsman when compared to people who have not called to complain.

H_2: Complainers are equally likely or more likely to feel the newspaper has a high interest in correcting errors after talking to the ombudsman when compared to people who have not called to complain.

It was further projected that the type of complaint of a caller might have some effect on the caller's satisfaction. For example, errors of fact such as a misspelled name, wrong age or incorrectly identified person can be corrected easily by the newspaper ombudsman and are corrected regularly. The more difficult kinds of problems are those related to news judgment and newspaper policy. Hence, a third hypothesis was tested.

H_3: Callers complaining about perceived fact errors will report higher levels of satisfaction with the newspaper's handling of the problem than callers who disagree with news judgment/newspaper policy.

Methodology

Two questionnaires were developed which took approximately five minutes to complete during a telephone interview, depending on how involved respondents were in their reponses to open-ended questions.

A list was generated of 438 names and telephone numbers of persons who had called the newspaper's ombudsman from January 1, 1984, until the research was conducted in November. The names were compiled by Alfred JaCoby, then the newspaper's ombudsman, from a list he kept of each person who telephoned him. All names were included. From that list it was possible to reach 152 persons and conduct telephone interviews, a 34% completion rate.

To compare opinions of those who had called the paper with those who had not, it was necessary to contact a representative sample of people who had not called the ombudsman. A total of 202 of these persons were interviewed over the telephone. Respondents were selected from the telephone book using a table of random numbers. While biases exist in the listed numbers of phone directories, this sampling strategy was deemed sufficient for the present exploratory study. Approximately 20 percent of the respondents were called back to confirm that the calls had been made and responses were accurate. No discrepancies were found.

Data analysis was conducted using the SPSS program, version 9.0, to determine levels of statistical significance, of relationships specified in the hypotheses.

Findings

Of the 152 persons who had called The San Diego Union, 107 were subscribers and 45 were nonsubscribers. Of the 202 persons who had not called the paper, 123 were subscribers and 79 were nonsubscribers.

Well over half (57 percent) of those who had occasion to call the newspaper knew of the ombudsman by name, or referred to him as a reader's representative or

ombudsman (see Table 1). For the largest single response, 49 percent reported Alfred JaCoby was the person with whom they had spoken. Six percent said they spoke with the ombudsman, 2 percent with the reader's representative, 23 percent did not know or did not remember, 17 percent spoke with another person on the newspaper staff, and 3 percent did not respond.

Related to this recognition of name and function was the response to another question asked of those who had called the newspaper. Twenty-two percent of the respondents said they had known to ask for the ombudsman when they called. Another 22 percent were referred to the ombudsman by the telephone operator and 37 percent by others. Eleven percent thought they should have asked for the editor (see Table 2). No statistical differences were noted between subscribers and non-subscribers in these questions relating to knowledge about the ombudsman and his role.

Those who have never called the newspaper about a problem answered somewhat differently, reflecting far less knowledge of the ombudsman and his role. Only 13 percent would know to call the ombudsman or readers's representative and 30 percent would call the editor. While 17 percent would call the telephone operator, another 27 percent did not know whom they would call (see Table 2).

Beyond the issue of recognition, 61 percent of those who called the newspaper with a problem were satisfied or very satisfied with the newspaper's response, leaving 12 percent dissatisfied and 17 percent very dissatisfied (see Table 3).

When callers were asked to describe The Union's interest in accuracy in the news, 57 percent of those who had called said The Union was very interested or interested with 23 percent replying they thought The Union was disinterested or very disinterested (see Table 4). Fifteen percent were neutral.

The persons who did not call the newspaper had a much larger percentage--31

percent--falling into the neutral/no opinion category. Where 56 percent thought The Union was interested or very interested in accuracy in the news, only 13 percent thought the paper was disinterested or very disinterested.

When these figures were analyzed using a contingency table and the chi square statistic, the differences were found to be statistically significant. This tends to confirm H_1 (see Table 4). The majority of callers (57%) and non-callers (56%) were equally likely to report that the Union was interested in accuracy. However, among the remaining respondents, non-callers were more frequent in the neutral category while callers were more frequent in the disinterested categories.

In a similar question probing respondents' attitudes toward The San Diego Union's attempts to correct errors, almost two-thirds (64 percent) of those who called the newspaper thought The Union was interested or very interested in correcting errors. Sixteen percent thought the Union was disinterested or very disinterested in error correction (see Table 5).

Fifty-one percent of those who had not called the newspaper said they thought the paper was interested or very interested in correcting errors whereas 11 percent thought the paper was disinterested or very disinterested in that issue. Worthy of note, 36 percent of those who had not called were neutral on the error correction issue whereas only 16 percent of those who called were neutral.

In crosstabulating those who did and did not call with responses to how interested the paper is in correcting errors, differences also were found to be statistically significant, confirming H_2 (see Table 5).

Although both H_1 and H_2 are supported, the issues are not clear cut. While the paper's perceived levels of interest are equal to or higher amongst those who called over those who did not, levels of disinterest also are higher among those who called,

particularly in ascertaining the Union's interest in accuracy. Perhaps the most noticeable difference, however, occurs in the higher neutral levels of those who did not call. These figures would tend to suggest that those who called are polarized, because they manifest more strongly held feelings toward the newspaper--slightly higher and slightly lower. Those who did not call are less polarized, as indicated by their far more neutral attitude.

When callers' reasons for contacting the newspaper were compiled, 29 percent complained about a fact error. The same percentage also complained about problems with news judgment or newspaper policy. Nine percent called with a positive response and, in 32 percent of the cases, the reason for the call could not be determined (see Table 6). For analytical purposes only two categories--fact errors and news judgment/newspaper policy--were examined to determine levels of satisfaction. Those who called about news judgment/newspaper policy showed slightly lower satisfaction and slightly higher dissatisfaction in response to their call than did those who complained about fact errors (see Table 6). The differences, however, did not prove to be statistically significant. Therefore, H_3 was rejected.

Conclusions

These findings indicate that a majority of people who have called The San Diego Union are aware of the ombudsman and the role he serves. Because large numbers of studies related to ombudsmen have not been undertaken, it is difficult to know whether the study's recognition figures should be interpreted as high or low. More research at other newspapers could help to provide norms for comparison in the future.

Further, the data suggest that a majority are satisfied with the newspaper's response to their call; in fact, over 40 percent indicated they were very satisfied.

When the precise reason for the call was analyzed, complaints fell into two major negative categories--fact errors and disagreement over newspaper policy and news judgment. It appears that the reason for the complaint, however, is not important to the caller when considering satisfaction with the newspaper's response because tests did not show a statistical significance. This would indicate simply by having a person with whom to discuss a complaint may be more important than the nature of the complaint itself. The figures do, however, show a greater satisfaction when a reader called to complain about a fact error than a news policy/judgment issue.

The implications of an ombudsman require additional examination when one considers the perceptions of those who called and did not call related to the newspaper's interest in accuracy and in attempting to correct errors. In both cases relating to accuracy and correcting errors, persons who had called the paper thought the paper was more interested in providing accurate news and correcting it if errors were made than those who never called.

Because of these findings, supported by the findings of the Bernstein study, an ombudsman may be one of the newspaper's most effective public relations tools--particularly if credibility is of primary concern to editors.

In summary, the data indicate calling a newspaper ombudsman may have some positive effect. This is predicated on the assumption that callers probably are somewhat dissatisfied if they are moved to call the newspaper in the first place. But, after the call, their level of satisfaction is equal to or higher than non-callers. If, in fact, some change takes place, further research into this process might provide evidence that the ombudsman may be valuable to the newspaper in improving the newspaper's image.

Table 1

Person Subscribers and Nonsubscribers
Spoke With

	N	%
Al JaCoby	74	49.3
Readers Representative	3	2.0
Ombudsman	9	6.0
Don't Know/Don't Remember	34	22.7
Other	26	17.3
Did Not Respond	4	2.7
Total	150	100.0

Table 2

Person at Newspaper Who Would Be Contacted by
Caller and Non-Caller

	Called		Did Not Call	
	#	%	#	%
Asked for Editor	17	11.3	60	30.3
Referred by Phone Operator	34	22.5	33	16.7
Referred by Other Department	56	37.0	27	13.6
Knew of Ombudsman	34	22.5	25	12.6
Other				
Didn't Know/Did Not Respond	10	6.0	53	26.8
Total	151	100.0	198	100.0

Table 3

Satisfaction Among Those
Who Called the Newspaper

	#	%
Very Satisfied	66	43.4
Satisfied	27	17.8
Neutral/No Opinion	10	6.6
Dissatisfied	18	11.8
Very Dissatisfied	26	17.1
Don't Know/Don't Remember	3	2.0
Did Not Respond	2	1.3
	152	100.0

Table 4

Perception of The San Diego Union's Interest
in Accuracy in the News

	Persons Who Called Newspaper (N = 152)		Persons Who Did Not Call Newspaper (N = 202)	
	#	%	#	%
Very Interested	32	21.1	26	12.9
Interested	55	36.2	86	42.6
Neutral/No Opinion	22	14.5	63	31.2
Disinterested	24	15.8	20	9.9
Very Disinterested	11	7.2	5	2.5
Did Not Respond	8	5.3	2	1.0
Total	152	100.0	202	100.0

Confirmed $x^2 = 20.8$ d.f. = 5 sig. = .0009

Table 5

Perception of The San Diego Union's Attempts to Correct Errors

	Persons Who Called Newspaper (A) (N = 152)		Persons Who Did Not Call Newspaper (B) (N = 202)	
	#	%	#	%
Very Interested	44	28.9	33	16.3
Interested	54	35.5	71	35.1
Neutral/No Opinion	24	15.8	72	35.6
Disinterested	13	8.6	19	9.4
Very Disinterested	11	7.2	4	2.0
Did Not Respond	6	3.9	3	1.5
Total	152	100.0	202	100.0

Confirmed $x^2 = 19.3$ d.f. = 5 sig. = .002

Table 6

Satisfaction With Call Broken Down
By Reason for Call

	Reason for Call	
	Fact Error	News Policy Judgment
	%	%
Very Satisfied	45.5	31.8
Satisfied	25.0	15.9
Neutral	6.8	9.1
Dissatisfied	9.1	22.7
Very Dissatisfied	11.4	15.9
Don't Know	2.3	2.3
Don't Remember	0	2.3
Total	100.0	100.0*

*N = 44 in each group

Not Confirmed N.S. p = .42

FOOTNOTES

[1]Organization of Newspaper Ombudsmen's annual report, 1985.

[2]Ben Bagdikian, "The American Newspaper is Neither Record, Mirror, Journal, Ledger, Bulletin, Telegram, Examiner, Register, Chronicle, Gazette, Observer, Monitor, Transcript Nor Herald of the Day's Events," Esquire, 1967, Vo. LXVII, No. 3, pp. 124, 138, 142-144, 146.

[3]A.H. Raskin, "What's Wrong with American Newspapers?", The New York Times Magazine, June 11, 1967, pp. 28 and 84.

[4]Donald T. Mogavero, "The American Press Ombudsman," Journalism Quarterly, 59:548-53, 580 (Winter 1982).

[5]William L. Barnett, "Survey Shows Few Papers are Using Ombudsmen," Journalism Quarterly, 50:153-56 (Spring 1973).

[6]David R. Nelsen and Kenneth Starck, "Newspaper Ombudsmen--As Viewed by the Rest of the Staff," Journalism Quarterly, 51:453-57 (Autumn 1974).

[7]Surat Kapoor and Ralph Smith, "The Newspaper Ombudsman--A Progress Report," Journalism Quarterly, 56:628-31 (Autumn 1979).

[8]Mogavero, ibid.

[9]James M. Bernstein, "The Public's View of Newspaper Accountability," Newspaper Research Journal, 7:1-9 (Winter 1986).